

Every year in the world's poorest countries millions of girls are forced into marriage. These girls - as young as age 8, but often 13, 14, 15 years old - are sold by impoverished parents to settle debts or they are given away to become wives to men years or even decades older.

For a young girl - a child - being forced to marry an adult man can only be described as a life of slavery, child molestation, and servitude. This is not marriage. It is a violation of the most basic human rights of a child.

On the floor today is S. 987 - the *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act* - a bill that was passed unanimously in the U.S. Senate. Let me repeat, this bill passed unanimously - every Republican and Democrat - in the Senate supported it. I want to commend Senators Richard Durban and Olympia Snowe, along with the other bipartisan co-sponsors, for their tremendous efforts to protect vulnerable girls.

It is my honor to be the sponsor of the companion bill in the House. And, I want to thank my Republican colleagues, Mr. Crenshaw, Mr. LaTourette, and Mr. Schock for their bipartisan support for ending child marriage.

According to United Nations Children's Fund - UNICEF -child marriage is "perhaps the most prevalent form of sexual abuse and exploitation of girls." One in seven girls in the developing world is forced into marriage before age 15 - millions of girls every year. A thirteen year old girl that is forced into marriage will not go to school. She is most certainly guaranteed to be a victim of domestic violence and condemned to a lifetime of poverty. She is more likely to die or be disabled in childbirth. And, because she is a child, her infant is more likely to die.

HIV infection, maternal death, child death, gender based violence, and extreme poverty are all deadly obstacles to development that destroy families, weaken communities, and destabilize countries. Child marriage contributes to all of these destructive problems.

The photo I have with me was taken by a brilliant photojournalist - Stephanie Sinclair - who documented child marriage in Afghanistan. This eleven-year old girl in the photo - Ghulam - is not seated with her grandfather. The man next to this child is to her husband-to-be. This little girl's father gave Ghulam to be married because he is too poor to care for her. Ghulam's value to her husband comes from her ability to work in the fields, care for animals, and because she's a virgin.

In this country a man treating an eleven year old as his wife would be imprisoned as a sexual predator, a pedophile. In Afghanistan an eleven year old's abuser is her husband.

It does not matter where in this world, an 11 year old girl should NEVER be anyone's wife.

Today we have an opportunity to put the lives of vulnerable girls ahead of what is all too common partisan political games that take place in this House. Today we can show our constituents and the world that the life of every girl has value and limitless potential if they can grow up free from exploitation.

It is my firm belief that girls - girls everywhere - in America, in Ethiopia, or in Afghanistan deserve the right to enter adulthood with the freedom to decide for themselves who their husband will be. A girl is not a commodity to be traded. She is a precious member of a community who needs to be valued and allowed to grow into adulthood.

This Congress and the American people spend billions of tax payer dollars on foreign assistance. The U.S. has a direct interest and an opportunity to ensure that girls in the developing world can grow up to be healthy, productive, contributing members of their communities and their countries. Not only do girls deserve the right to choose their future husband, they deserve the opportunity to get an education - to contribute their skills and talents to their countries.

This legislation supports and expands the successful models already in place for promoting girls education, protecting the human rights of girls, and eliminating the practice of child marriage. This bill authorizes existing State Department funds to be used to implement a strategy to protect girls from being forced into marriage. This bill does not spend one additional dollar that is not already appropriated by Congress for health, education, democracy, or other development activities.

Earlier this week I was honored to receive a letter from Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa urging House passage of S. 987. I ask unanimous consent to have this letter entered in the record.

Archbishop Tutu's letter said, and I quote from it: "Child marriage is a harmful practice that treats young girls as property, stops their education and robs them of their childhood and

dignity."

The Archbishop goes on to write: "thank you for your attention and dedication to passing this bill before Congress adjourns.

By doing so, you may help make the difference between lives of opportunity or enslavement for millions of girls."

Madam Speaker, child marriage is sanctioned sexual abuse that destroys girls' lives. The choice before this Congress is to do nothing as young girls, children, continue to be enslaved, raped, and condemned to a life of abuse and poverty. Or, we can join the U.S. Senate and vote to pass this legislation and have the United States stand with millions of girls - today and tomorrow - who seek nothing more than the freedom, the opportunity, and the time be allowed to be children, to grow into adulthood without being forced into marriage.

I thank Chairman Berman for his support, and I urge my all my colleagues to vote to protect the millions of girls in this world from sexual abuse.